

# Instruments

An Installation Exhibition

by

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I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Sasha Nelson

## **Abstract**

The *Instruments* installation represents the superimposition of two systems. The marketed elements that comprise the hegemony exerted by commodity culture are placed on top of the occult qabalistic Tree of Life. This overlaying makes the commentary that the pursuit of identity through commodified objects usurps and drowns out the natural fundamental components of the human psyche. The artist accomplishes this by creating various expressive multimedia sculptures out of actual objects. Each one is given a title that references a particular sphere on the Tree of Life glyph, for each piece is meant to represent that sphere's aspect of the human entity as it is expressed in the commodity realm.

The artist begins by introducing the reader to the artistic contexts and the various conceptual structures that serve to inform and describe his mode of working and its results. Subsequently, a detailed description of each work is given, simultaneously functioning as a necessarily brief survey of the spheres on the qabalistic glyph.

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This exhibition is dedicated to my wife

Beth Ross

whose seemingly unlimited patience  
has helped me to find my own.

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*“If every loose object on earth, alone or in combination, is at least theoretically available as an element of the sculptural, then a large part of the art of making sculpture lies with the mechanism of filtering, selecting and assembling.”*

The *prima materia* of the medieval alchemists was the point of departure for all subsequent psycho-chemical operations performed, ultimately resulting in the creation of substances that facilitated the transformation of material and spiritual entities. What it was that exactly constituted the *prima materia* is a mystery, more because of the countless synonyms given to describe it than any conscious desire to conceal secrets.<sup>1</sup> Overall, there seems to be a few recurring themes. The *prima materia* was the original source of the various forms that matter came to hold throughout alchemical processes. It was a chaotic, undifferentiated mass that harboured utmost potential. Analytical psychologist Carl Jung attributed this aspect of alchemy to the unconscious, as it reflects the indiscriminable nature of the latter, where its contents are conglomerated into an immeasurable ocean that is, for all intents and purposes, homogenous.<sup>2</sup> Discrete manifestations come into being by surfacing in our dreams and waking psychic experiences. We draw the various substances of our conscious life from the vast, uniform depths of the unconscious.

The alchemical process constitutes my general mode of studio practice. Insofar as media is concerned, the alchemists' *prima materia* applies, for my material could be said to be *anything*. Every loose object, every visual signal, every sensory condition for that matter, is permissible. Perhaps it is reflective of the post-modern situation in which anything is up for grabs and there is not one modernist paradigm to govern our creations

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<sup>1</sup> Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, p.317

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.323



– a time when appropriation has reached a level that depicts a multi-limbed, Hindu-like artist-deity reaching to the far corners of the world and the smallest crevices of the studio. Such use of material most definitely calls up certain analyses of the Arte Povera movement of 1960's Italy. As art critic Tommaso Trini put forth, if various Arte Povera artists like

Mario and Marisa Merz, Prini, Zorio, Boetti or Anselmo had at their disposal the very latest materials from Dow Chemicals or programmes and computers from IBM, they would not fail to use them. But exactly the same applies to craft or household materials to hand. Everything is at [their art's] disposal; everything flows from the necessity for the means.<sup>3</sup>

The movement went much further than widening the range of media deemed acceptable by artists. Political engagement in a heightening technological age was of equal significance, communicated by virtue of using unpretentious materials, paring down signs to their archetypes.<sup>4</sup>

The return to simple materials reveals laws and processes deriving from the power of the imagination and is an examination of the artists' own conduct in an industrialized society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Trini, quoted by Lumley, Arte Povera, p.43

<sup>4</sup> Lumley, Arte Povera, p. 13

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 16

Though such political commentary is present within my work, an elucidation of its presence will have to wait until later. For now, it is important to know that any material is allowed, be it traditionally artistic, like paint, wood, metal or clay, or be it non-traditional, like tar, wire, soil, electronics, audio, or – especially – objects. I will use things found on the ground, in the garbage, generally discarded, or objects that have been purchased new or second-hand. The *prima materia* of the entire physical world is laid out on a palette that is, essentially, cosmic in scope.

Though anything is permitted, the artistic use of objects is the most significant for two reasons. Firstly, it comprises a fundamental part of the conceptual basis of this thesis exhibition (upon which will be elaborated in due course). Secondly, it provides me with a chaotic environment of a nature that keeps my inspiration level at a maximum. What is meant by this is that my studio has progressively become filled up with things acquired, picked up simply by them having piqued my interest, whether aesthetically or for their formal possibilities. The messy piles of things serve as a source of material that is always close at hand. I can draw from it and make a construction using little more than my favorite tools – namely a drill, a jigsaw, and various adhesives. The actual act of production is fast-paced and in fact quite ecstatic given that I am physically manipulating the components of a piece with my body and forcing them together into the form I choose at any given moment. I suppose there is a sense of empowerment that arises from this process.

This ecstatic mode of working holds similarities to what Nietzsche called the *Dionysian* temperament in The Birth of Tragedy. As opposed to the even, ordered,

image-based, “instinctive [...] drive for beauty”<sup>6</sup> of the *Apollonian* character, the music-based Dionysian demeanor was an ecstatic orgy, a chaotic loosening of an individual from his ego – unison with Nature. The process of construction in which I engage is a lot like a Dionysian dithyramb – a rapturous dance – comprising one person. An important parallel is that I almost always listen to music while working. The type of music more often than not instills the urge to thrash around in the studio, being of the sort that is a post-modern, hyper-complex, yet still musical offshoot of what has been termed heavy metal or extreme music. The powerful emotions, the polyrhythmic undulations, the sheer force, the hallucinatory textures all contribute immensely to that which I feel compelled to convey artistically. It should not be surprising, then, that there is a critical, rebellious, jaded feeling to the *Instruments* installation, for heavy music tends to convey some sort of frustration in one way or another. A dithyrambic reaction is an appropriate response when one seeks freedom from certain oppressive forces.

The mode by which I tend to create artworks has become a fitting vehicle for specific critical issues. It would be easiest to begin to illustrate some particular issues this exhibition has come to embody by showing how they are paralleled in the work of a number of other artists of our time. In an introductory essay to Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a publication that accompanied an exhibition from 2007 of the same name at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Richard Flood describes the state of art in our chaotic, saturated era as a condition where “everything exists simultaneously in an unending tumble cycle,” and “television is prosperous because it has learned how to graft the identities of the creatures it broadcasts onto those

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p.19

who view it.”<sup>7</sup> The sculptures in this book/exhibition (including, but not limited to, work by Rachel Harrison, Urs Fischer, Kristen Morgan, Alexandra Bircken, and Marc André Robinson) may be frequently difficult to perceive as anything even close to beautiful, or aesthetic at all for that matter, and generally *seem* to depict some kind of haphazard creation process.

Things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation feel right. Stubby, brutish forms that know something of the world in which they are made tell the contemporary story. Works that appear hurled into uncomfortable, anxious relationships run parallel to life. Objects with knots of nerve endings reaching out to find a brain mirror the fugue states of everyday consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

This is culturally appropriate because, as Flood elucidates, in the twenty-first century many artists cling desperately to technique, “which has become the varnished mausoleum for ‘masterpieces.’”<sup>9</sup> And such arbitrarily declared masterpieces respond more to the market than to our “time of acute instability.” This era is in need of an “anti-masterpiece.”<sup>10</sup>

In regards to my own work, the conscious creation of an anti-masterpiece was not the original intention, and still isn’t, at least not solely. In earlier work, my intention had been almost the opposite, yet the pieces produced were constantly interpreted as being of the kind of cultural-artistic, aesthetic-rejecting response that Flood describes. I was not attempting to criticize anything. I started by being (and continue to be) drawn into the

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<sup>7</sup> Flood, “Not About Mel Gibson,” Unmonumental, p.10 - 11

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.12

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.12

symbols and synchronicities that arise from attempting to exclude the influence of the conscious thinking ego as much as possible. Making rough, somewhat jury-rigged constructions was simply an epiphenomenon of a rapid, more spiritually and psychologically driven pursuit. Perhaps I had been involved in the *unmonumental response* by circumstance, as an individual who is symptomatic of a particular time. To an extent, I had been mirroring our culture, “telling the contemporary story,” reflecting the state of capitalist civilization from the position of a pathological case study – a result of our condition. As Hoptman says,

It is indeed too simple to regard contemporary visual culture as a mirror, but if it does not reflect nor comment upon the disorder of the world, the language of assemblage is undeniably a result of it.<sup>11</sup>

Having researched subjects relating to what one might call our “cultural complexes” (such subjects being subculture, commodification and the philosophy of objects, and analytical psychology), I am now actually making an overt critique. I am interested in bringing the unmonumental response a step further, looking deeper into the myriad shambles of objects that clutter our world, trying to uncover the secret frameworks that create people like me – case studies of a fractured and chaotic era.

The work in this exhibition is not unrelated to the unmonumental response; it is in fact very closely intertwined, but more like a ricochet – a response to a response – without denying the importance of the original response, which is necessary to comprehend where we stand. The work of Rachel Harrison, for example, which was

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<sup>11</sup> Hoptman, “Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. from *Unmonumental*, p. 137

featured in the *Unmonumental* exhibition, presents a number of similarities to mine. In an extensively researched review in *Art in America*, Brian Boucher pulls out of Harrison's seemingly random, unaesthetic constructions a complex network of symbolism. The symbols relate almost exclusively to popular and historical culture, with the titles in her "If I Did It" exhibition, for instance, all making reference to socially prominent men.<sup>12</sup> Harrison also tends to adhere differing objects and other materials together, and then unifies them with a coat of paint. Often she will add a video monitor or photograph. The reader will discover throughout this essay that these conceptual and formal decisions are quite akin to my practices. Parallels can be drawn to the work of Marc André Robinson as well, who uses found objects to make dual statements of opposing significance. By making a piece appear both appealing and appalling, a viewer feels "simultaneously enthroned and threatened."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Robinson makes allusions to music and music culture, as in *Throne for the Songs That Will Come by Themselves and of Themselves* (2008) and *Throne for the Greatest Rapper of All Time* (2005). The allusions are associated with the politics of identity, as in the *Greatest Rapper* piece, about which Robinson has said, "I started to think about this mythical cultural position, and the possibility that the position was something that was always claimable by someone."<sup>14</sup> Music culture presents an opportunity for self-conceptualization. Again, such patterns will be seen to exist in my work as well. Yet, as Flood characterizes the *Unmonumental* work as *reflective* of society, I feel that my work participates in a similar reflection while, at the same time, it attempts to convey a possible alternative to the unfortunate state of Western culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Boucher, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men". *Art in America* 95, no.6, p.186-9 Je./Jl 2007

<sup>13</sup> Wright, "Informed by Function". *Art Nexus* 7, no.70, 160-1 S/D 2008

<sup>14</sup> Hauser, "The Backstory | Castoff Chairs". <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com>. March 9, 2009

Though the contemporary situation provides a context in which the *Instruments* work can exist, there is a historical precedent to what has been called *assemblage*, that is, the artistic use of assembled objects, among other elements. The term was coined by Jean Dubuffet in the early 1950's to describe the works of Rauschenberg (among others), and earlier precursors like the works of Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and other "precedents in European experiments of the first two decades of the twentieth century."<sup>15</sup> However, while these precursors, which are principally "Dada, Surrealism and their neo-avant-garde epigones,"<sup>16</sup> used such literary descriptors as metaphor and allegory to provide insight and political critique, "[t]he twenty-first-century version of assemblage is particularly suited to the metonymic paradigm because not only does it incorporate pieces of the situation it describes, but each sculpture itself narrates the world, albeit in précis."<sup>17</sup> Yet, this metonymic character can be found in John Cage's likening of Rauschenberg's combines to a newspaper, in that there is no single subject but rather a juxtaposition of disparate elements.<sup>18</sup> A combine is a piece of reality rather than a representation, for it combines actual things into a composition. A major mode of differentiation, then, is that contemporary assemblages are "compositionally [...] holistic, in the sense that discrete objects coalesce into a single form, a narrative told with clarity."<sup>19</sup> Such is the case with the pieces in the *Instruments* installation, for, though discrete objects are often identifiable, they are almost always unified by having been painted the dominant colour of each distinct sculpture. Furthermore, as the exhibition's

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<sup>15</sup> Hoptman, "Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". from Unmonumental, p. 128

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.138

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.138

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.132

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.133

“narrative” is complex and manifold, it conforms to another distinction made between contemporary assemblage and its historical precedents:

It is still popular for exhausted critics to characterize recent assemblage as adhering to a kind of “anything-goes edict of post-Duchampian sculpture.” But the fact is the best of this work is highly organized – or in its visual arts translation, composed – into narratives that are more often than not participatory in contemporary artistic as well as political discourse.<sup>20</sup>

While formally *Instruments* is characterized by assemblage, conceptually the exhibition is a commentary on the hegemony that commodity culture holds over the natural tendencies of the human being. Each piece in the installation is a disrupted reference to a particular commodified product or set of ideas marketed to the public for the purposes of corporate economic gain and control. Each commodity-set is linked to a specific aspect of the human entity, based on the framework of the occult qabalistic Tree of Life. The overarching idea behind using the Tree of Life as a framework is that marketing has the potential to exploit and usurp the elementary facets of the human microcosm up to cosmic proportions. The entire installation is an overt hyperbole intended on exposing the invisible nature of consumer identity, as each piece is meant to break down the ideological constructs that constitute the vehicles of commodification.

The principle of hegemony represents a disconcerting truth. As Dick Hebdige describes in Subculture: The Meaning of Style, hegemony is the exertion of a *complete* authority by certain classes of society over other classes, such authority being comprised

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.138



of the ideologies that keep the classes under control in their subordinate position. The controlling classes are often those that have power over the means of material or industrial production, and in turn have power over the creation of intellectual structures, keeping those who do not have means in check. The most disturbing aspect of such hegemony is that, by virtue of particular modes of disseminating ideas, it appears as a natural order, not ideological at all, but a fundamental, inescapable aspect of reality.<sup>21</sup> Having been deeply affected by this possibility, I have exaggerated (perhaps) or elaborated upon the concept of hegemony to include all possible categories of the human psyche, bringing the scope of the usurped authority to the cosmic level. Creating assemblage works using the very objects that are the ends of production (as compared to the means) is an attempt to show that, within hegemony, “[t]he ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.”<sup>22</sup>

Generally, the physical things of the world fill our consciousness, thoughtform-jugs holding meaning-water like words on a page. In artist Cornelia Parker’s work, the symbolic or connotative properties of objects are often explored. In “Embryo Guns” and “Embryo Money,” each of these items are shown in their early stages of production, being merely vague silhouettes of their forms-to-be. “At what point, Parker asks, is the power of money and guns imprinted, instilled or conveyed in these otherwise innocent lumps of metal?”<sup>23</sup> This brings to light the elusive process of associating import to object, the vague “moment of transubstantiation [...] meaningless object to

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<sup>21</sup> Hebdige, Subculture, p.15-16

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan. “Matter and What It Means.” Cornelia Parker, p.22

powerful metaphor.”<sup>24</sup> Some objects obtain meaning by accumulating a particular historical function (like guns), or by being constructed as purely symbolic entities, only indirectly linked to a tangible reality (as with money’s relation to gold). Sometimes – perhaps most often – the creation of an object’s associated meaning is an intentional act, really quite insidious, on the part of commodity or ideological authorities. Furthermore, in fabricating such connotations, objects lose their essence. As Neil Cummings clearly expresses in Reading Things:

Commodity objects lend themselves to being severed from their material presence, they are easily flattened down into an economy of visual signs. De-materialized and transparent they wantonly slip and slide unanchored in time or specific context. As passive carriers of meanings, as pure signs, they are at the mercy of a medium cynically dominated by ‘lifestyle’ advertising and the projected desires of targeted ‘aspirational clusters.’<sup>25</sup>

It is as if a certain amount of sympathy is required in considering the life of an object. A thing that passes through the path of commodification is basically raped and manipulated without any respect for its “material presence.” In Cummings’ opinion, as well as my own, an object regains its essence in *use*. Quoting Heidegger, who uses the example of a jug, Cummings explains that

in action the jug would be invisible in its own perfect efficiency – “the Thing is”. The moment the jug enters consciousness, through reflection, or in representation it

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.22

<sup>25</sup> Cummings, ed. “Reading Things: The Alibi of Use.” Reading Things, p. 17-18

becomes “an allegory of use”. A “Thing” can never be itself, fully present, and simultaneously a symbol. The moment it migrates as a symbol, it expresses something that does not belong to it, and ceases to be in its essential state.<sup>26</sup>

Cummings goes further by suggesting that to use an object for something different than its proposed function is a form of resistance to the semiotic stronghold of commodification. For example, using a corkscrew to prop open a door, or using a coat hanger to replace the missing aerial of a car resists the signifying identities projected onto the normal uses of such objects.<sup>27</sup> This transcendence of the insidious, authoritative representation surrounding objects seems based largely on practical need (which brings to mind the Marxist theory of use, as Cummings puts it, where “use value is assumed to operate directly upon need, it is the very heart of the object, its moral foundation”<sup>28</sup>). The coat hanger aerial, the corkscrew doorstop, cut tennis balls on towing brackets, and plasticine used to tentatively repair a leaking pipe (to reference more of Cummings’ great illustrations) show that these objects are brought to their new use through necessity and innovation.

This mode of object-usage has been a fundamental part of my studio practice. As mentioned above, being in the habit of constantly collecting interesting, often discarded things from around the everyday environment, my studio has steadily filled up. While working on something, I regularly resort to rifling through all this stuff to find just what is needed. More often than not, the things used are accepted for their practical import, like the old iMac computer used for the screen of the giant iPod (Yesod). It was lying

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.23

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.22

around. I originally intended to have the iPod's screen projected onto mylar from behind the sculpture, but the ultimate solution was much more aesthetically fitting and had more representational implications (also being an Apple product). In the making of the portable video game system piece (Hod), there happened to be two wooden tables that I had collected, which seemed would be best suited to create the shape of the referenced commodity. It was a formal choice, principally. This being said, it would be naïve and untruthful to suggest that the objects I use exemplify *only* Cummings' usage-resistance phenomenon. Aside from when something is used that I do not recognize but find materially interesting, objects undoubtedly do "migrate as symbols" in the work quite frequently. In fact, the overall appearance of the pieces in this installation most often directly reference very particular objects that indeed signify appeals to certain "aspirational clusters," hence the iPod, the Facebook cell phone, the portable video game system, the Christmas tree, the gun-truck and so on. However, as mentioned above, in the creative process – in the actual physical act of making artistic decisions – objects are drawn forth primarily for their practical and formal possibilities. Symbolism is almost always a synchronistic<sup>29</sup> event. In the Hod piece, I realized after the piece had been finished that tables may draw up notions of the phenomenon of séances, or the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, the supposed founder of alchemy, both connotations being astoundingly, though serendipitously, supportive of the appropriate concepts for that sphere on the Tree of Life. I have come to trust that things will work out that way. Most often in my practice, concrete objects "transubstantiate" to the more abstract realm of meaning and ideology of their own accord, whether because of the relationships that

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<sup>29</sup> As a note of explanation, Dictionary.com defines the term *synchronicity* concisely: "Coincidence of events that seem to be meaningfully related, conceived in Jungian theory as an explanatory principle on the same order as causality."

are formed with other objects in making purely formal choices, or whether something is unconsciously chosen for symbolic reasons. It is “of their own accord” in that I do not often consciously choose objects for symbolic import, though sometimes deliberate symbolic material choices are made, as when I chose to use Christmas trees for the Tiphareth tuning fork.

It may seem self-contradictory to, at times, deconstruct the ideological dimension of objects through the aforementioned usage-resistance, while, at other times, construct very purposefully symbolic forms that make use of the same talismanic or fetish-like aspects. In some ways it likely *is* contradictory, but I see it as more of a paradox than a glaring fault. As Nietzsche described, Greek Tragedy was born of the meeting and cooperation of the opposing Apollonian and Dionysian temperaments. The two balanced each other. This is very similar to what happens in my practice. Having chosen a specific conceptual skeleton (the qabalistic Tree of Life and the hegemony of commodification), it provided a form into which the cathartic, expressive construction process could squeeze itself, like a colourful yet amorphous blob of playdoh pushed into an intricate mold. The Apollonian provided definition while the Dionysian provided life force. Within this marriage of opposing temperaments, my practice could be broken down as follows:

- Though the entire physical world is usable, objects are the central medium.
- Usage-resistance is the immediate, practical-formal construction process, which supplies the instances of unhinged, confounding, material expression (described above as relating to the Dionysian temperament).

- Overall concept is the underlying limiting force that makes decisions relating to aesthetics, symbolism, and consideration of the viewer's reaction (described above as relating to the Apollonian temperament).

In this light, the *Instruments* installation becomes more than a just critique of commodity culture, which is principally an extroverted, socially geared operation. It is also a drawing forth of the symbolic contents of the psyche, projected into corporeal reality for a viewer to observe, and thus an introverted operation. The work is more representational than abstract, depicting a hermaphroditic internal/external picture of the individual/collective psyche.

There are two layers in the conceptual skeleton of this work, one superimposed over the other. The supposed elements of the marketed hegemony of the commodity realm overlays the structure of the Tree of Life. Connections are made by appropriating the two quite disparate systems and finding correlations between them. The correlations constitute the basic foundations upon which each sculpture is created. Each piece serves as a kind of mediator between the secular-economic and the sacred-mystical layers.

Continuing along this theme of *in-betweenness*, it is here appropriate to point out that all but one of the pieces in the installation embody a combination of three-dimensional (3D) and two-dimensional (2D) formats. The works are sculptural and therefore 3D, taking advantage of the physical presence of the discipline. They are simultaneously 2D, and depict the illusionistic aspect of painting, obviously meant to be seen from the front. They are two-and-a-half-dimensional (2½D). One can walk around the pieces and observe that the façades are exactly that, for the backs expose the manner by which each one has been constructed, propped up, or how it works. Thus, the 2½D

format connects intimately with the conceptual basis of the exhibition. The three-dimensionality of the external collective world meets the two-dimensionality of the internal, personal projections. Similarly, the 3D concrete world of objects is connected to the 2D abstract world of ideology. Furthermore, on the façades of all but one piece<sup>30</sup>, there is slathered an immiscible mixture of oil- and water-based paints, again representing the paradoxical union of opposites, which Jung called *coniunctio*. Like the *prima materia*, the principle of the hermaphroditic *coniunctio* references another of the various phenomena connected with medieval alchemy.

Akin to alchemy, in the sense of its esoteric nature, is the glyph of the occult qabalistic Tree of Life, which functions as an integral component of this exhibition. The glyph encompasses the natural elements of the human entity – foundations upon which the herein suggested cosmic hegemony is built. Distinguished from the Judaic *kabbalah*, the occult *qabalah* presents a more syncretic approach, finding mythological instances of each of the “categories” or spheres on the Tree of Life across essentially *all* the world’s spiritual traditions. Though the topic is fascinating in its ability to synthesize potentially disparate mystical ideas, it would be far beyond the scope of this essay to go into every possible facet. Therefore, it would be best to describe the glyph in question and the corresponding individual pieces of the *Instruments* exhibition simultaneously. Alongside detailed descriptions of the artworks, information about the Tree of Life will be provided, which has been obtained solely from Dion Fortune’s The Mystical Qabalah and Aleister Crowley’s The Book of Thoth. Hopefully the reader will gain an understanding of the correlations between the occult system and the particular marketing vehicles created for

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<sup>30</sup> The reader may be wondering why “all but one piece” seems to be a recurring phrase. This will become clear in the detailed descriptions of the individual pieces.

the exhibition. Each description will fall under the Hebrew word (and its English translation) which serves as the title of both the particular sphere of the Tree of Life and the corresponding artwork. The order of the descriptions is that in which the viewer will encounter the works upon entry into the gallery, except for “Ets Chayyim,” which will be accessed at the tail end of the installation, but will appear first here for the sake of providing an introduction to the Tree of Life as a whole.

For clarity’s sake, it is not my intention to be preaching the infallibility of qabalah or any other system. Evidently, there are some strong opinions being voiced within the artworks. These are more incitements for discussion or questioning rather than proclamations of hard and fast truths. As artist Mike Kelley describes, when, in interpretation, a viewer projects him or herself onto an artwork, that is merely the condition of nature, for we project our thoughts and feelings onto the external world perpetually. It is not art. Art does not do anything too phenomenal if it simply provides an opportunity for a viewer to accomplish in the gallery what he or she might accomplish at any other particular moment in life. Far from being didactic, “the relationship between the viewer and the artist is ‘conversational’,” as Kelley puts it; “even though [he] allow[s] for an openness of reading, it’s not completely open.”<sup>31</sup>

***Ets Chayyim (Tree of Life)***: The glyph depicts the progressive manifestations of the universe, in the macrocosmic sense, and the lower reflection or parallel that is the human being, thus in the microcosmic sense. One of the fundamental principles of hermeticism, “as above, so below,” applies in this instance in that the parts of the glyph can be read as

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Kelley by Isabelle Graw in Mike Kelley, Phaidon Press Limited, p,14



either macrocosmic or microcosmic. The progression traverses the path from the most subtle beginnings to the densest realm of the physical world. Each stage along the path describes a distinct property. The ten stages, called *sephiroth* (which is plural – the singular form is *sephira*), are associated with the numbers 1 to 10 of the decimal system. The descent from the subtle to the dense is called *involution*, the path forming the shape called the *lightning bolt*. When the stages are ascended from the dense to the subtle, it is called *evolution*, which is the path followed by the viewer of the *Instruments* exhibition, called the *flaming sword*. This path is painted on the floor, leading from one piece to the next. The comment here is that the viewer evolves by virtue of being exposed to the progression of disrupted commodities.

The *Ets Chayyim* painting is an avatar for the conversational element of art (mentioned above in relation to Kelley). It provides an opportunity for the viewer to look into the structure that underlies the work seen, for it is hung on the wall above a comfortable seating area, where the viewer can relax and read a text describing the installation's connection with the Tree of Life. This is not to suggest that qabalah provides a *factual* basis upon which our relationship to commodification exists. Merely the act of reading about the conceptual background fulfils the purpose of the exhibition, which is to pierce the veils that are presented to us. What it is exactly that is discovered beneath the veils is up for debate. In this work, the placeholder is the Tree of Life, though viewers may find other significant patterns that have equal potential for evolving consciousness. The piece is placed at the end of the *flaming sword* path to encourage the experience of first viewing these works without prior knowledge, and then moving to a position of being informed of the esoteric or occult – that which was previously hidden.

**10. Malkuth (Kingdom):** This is quite simply the material world and the physical body with which we interact on a daily basis. It is accessed by the five senses. Since it represents what lies all around in front of our faces, this piece is a gate made from a single strand of wire with the title in cursive at the top. The viewer walks through it upon entry into the gallery. By its positioning, “malkuth” is only readable when one looks back to the gate from inside, signifying that the title pertains to whence one has come. Considering the fact that the material world is that which, literally, *grounds* all other forces, it is noteworthy that the pieces within the exhibition are principally fabricated from the physical objects of the everyday.

**9. Yesod (Foundation):** As the sephiroth emanate down the path of involution, they culminate their energies in Yesod, which prepares them for entry and full manifestation into the corporeal realm. Yesod works together with Hod and Netzach (the following two pieces) to comprise the astral or emotional body – the world of symbols or images imbued with emotional energy. Thus, these three works are the only ones to have screens, for, in my opinion, the screen is the medium through which, in our society, the imagination is colonized, and through which the tendency to identify emotionally is captured. Yesod depicts a giant iPod, a portable music-listening device. As artist Gregg Bordowitz has said,

The entire culture is driven by an iPod logic where on a minute-by-minute basis we're dialing up emotions to survive, to cope, to get by from one moment of despair to the next. I feel the entire culture is wired to a digital-pharmaceutical complex.<sup>32</sup>

Coincident with the above quoted comment is the fact that Yesod represents, on the upward path of evolution, the first contact with the emotional body – the ethereal double – like a simulacrum of one's self-concept. Thus, this piece introduces the viewer to two particular themes that recur throughout the others. One, most of the works stand in relatively similar scale to the human body, suggesting perhaps a kind of reflection, forming new, reiterated permutations along each stage on the Tree. The second theme is that all the pieces have a musical audio element, the iPod being the setter of the stage in that music embodies the powerful potential to manipulate one's actions through emotional stimulation. As described earlier, such is the case with my personal experience, that is, the way music affects me and my practice by creating an opportunity for ecstasy. Musical emotional evocation is a fact of movie soundtracks, advertisements, and other such carriers as well.

The robotic computer voice that serenades the listener/viewer through the Yesod iPod has a kind of apocalyptic, almost moralizing feeling to it, singing in the Macintosh text-to-speech voice called 'Pipe Organ':

you are a good person you are a bad person where will you go from here i don't  
think you know rapture rapture rapture rapture rapture rapture rapture rapture

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<sup>32</sup> Anastas, The Artist is a Currency, p.114

from the end of the world a skull's bleeding heart opens for all the young ones who  
are nothing but receptacles for your dementia dementia

now wait now wait now wait for me and my dramatic entrance because i will be  
waiting for you to crumble under my provocative wish of death

The words are evidently poetic, written, in truth, in a stream of consciousness mode. However, upon reading them now, analyzing the way they ended up being used, these 'lyrics' appear to be an appropriate summary of the feeling encapsulated by the entire exhibition.

There is a third recurring theme, perhaps more subtle, that the viewer encounters for the first time in this sculpture. The video that plays on the iPod screen is an archival film from the United States Library of Congress, which depicts an enormous industrial generator being assembled in a Westinghouse factory at the turn of the 20th century. This reference to the past, especially one that stirs up thoughts concerning early corporate structures or other precursors to the market-driven era we inhabit today, comes up in other works in *Instruments*. The image of a generator in assembly is an appropriate symbolic vehicle for the process of constructing a total psyche-usurping hegemony – a machine, which is reliant on a particular kind of fuel (emotions), meant to pump the resulting energy (capital) to specific sectors of society.

**8. *Hod (Splendour)*:** The commodity directly referenced in this work is the 'Playstation Portable Go' (PSP Go) hand-held video game system. Two tables serve as the materials that make up its primary structure. Over the oil/water paint texture, and around the screen, is a geometric symbol called the *double ashlar*, which is simply two concentric

squares rotated 45 degrees from each other. This was added as a formal element, principally to evoke the notion of occult knowledge, of which this sphere is the representative. Upon further research, I discovered that the double ashlar could denote the presence of one ‘overseeing’ social order on top of a second lower social order, as in the Masonic tradition. This was clearly appropriate for the theme of the installation.

The video that plays on the PSP’s screen shows a ridiculously pixelated video game, apparently geared toward helping young children to learn their alphabet. The Egyptian god Thoth hops as each letter is intoned in the familiar alphabet song, and as each letter appears in the sky. A cartoony turtle looks on from a rainbow-laden landscape. The turtle was originally added as a point of humour – a kind of tongue-in-cheek reference to the many video games containing similar characters, marketed to children far too young to be playing them, in my opinion. As with the use of the tables and the double ashlar shape, the turtle turned out to have synchronistic symbolic import, the turtle shell being the material out of which Hermes’ zither was made. Hermes is the Greek form of the Egyptian Thoth, both gods representing, at least in part, the intellect, which is another facet to the sephira Hod. Thoth also was he who gave writing to the ancients.

The fact that the faux-video-game is so pixelated, along with the use of an early Atari game soundtrack, is an instance of the thematic calling-up of the historical beginning phases in the production of certain commodity systems, which, in this case, is the demand for electronic interactivity. Disguised under the cloak of intellectual enrichment, these electronic, interactive babysitters are merely marketing tentacles reaching terrifyingly deep into the developmental stages of memory, habit and desire. With any luck, these kids would grow up to spend their cashier employment income on

the latest game that features the most realistic depiction of the murder of prostitutes for points.<sup>33</sup>

**7. *Netzach (Victory)*:** This is the sphere of relationship, communication, intimacy, and the magnetic attraction of sexuality. The sculpture is a large cell phone, which is also a bed prepared for an intimate encounter. Blossoming vines and roses suggest romance. They also act with the numbered buttons made of bark to conjure up the realm of Nature, which *Netzach* embodies as well. The cell phone's video shows a nightclub with various hyper-sexualized individuals dancing under the Facebook logo. As the stereotypical dance beat progresses, a toy bride doll materializes above the dancers and sings the following lyrics:

ooooh yum yum put it there check out my new face book it to the club baby now shake  
it in my face. book.

The Western social representation of relating has essentially become pornography. Though exceptions undoubtedly exist, Facebook is chock-full of individuals exhibiting themselves in photos they have deemed appropriate by criteria seemingly based solely on maximum sexiness. Besides the obvious superficiality of this type of relationship, social networking, cell phones, and other communication media put an electronic filter between people. These channels do not encourage interrelation between persons in physical proximity, though the *reality* behind these mediated interactions in the first place is that people are physical.

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<sup>33</sup> Which is a real instance from a recent version of the game *Grand Theft Auto*.

**6. Tiphareth (Beauty):** The concept of mediation is paramount in Tiphareth.

Mythological representatives of this sphere are Jesus Christ and Prometheus, both sacrificing themselves for the good of humankind. Both are *mediators* between the divine world and the mundane world. This sephira appears in the very center of the Tree of Life. Thus, it is quite fitting that the tuning fork made from Christmas trees has laid around its base gifts wrapped in advertisement flyers, for commodity culture is the center of the system I've created to parallel the qabalistic one. The tuning fork shape and the radio tuner interface act as just that – tuners. This piece hones ideological frequencies into the products one might purchase. It is also a comment on the potential unspoken assumption that, during the economic maelstrom of the holiday season, one emulates the self-sacrifice of Christ by giving up a portion of one's wages for the materialistic gain of another. This is evidently a cynical perspective, but, as mention earlier, these works are hyperboles created to make strong points. The audio that accompanies the piece is a series of musical Christmas moments interspersed throughout roaming radio tuner static. The listener will also hear snippets of random advertisements.

**Geburah (Strength):** Geburah is the destroyer, the warrior, that which breaks down established structures, and vanquisher of threatening opposition. It is also the sphere of overt male sexuality, as Netzach is the sphere of the feeling-based female sexuality, represented mythologically by the wedded Mars and Venus, respectively. The sculpture here depicts an object that is simultaneously a gun and a truck, the former standing in for the “warrior” tendency in Western civilization, while the latter takes the role of

machismo, insofar as the marketing of said merchandise is concerned. The entire piece is phallic in shape, the opening at the end (which would be the barrel in one case and the muffler in another) releasing a trail of semen-exhaust-smoke. It will be redundant to excuse these comments any longer than necessary, but it should be known that I am not suggesting that males are less sensitive than females, or that trucks are for dunderheads, or that warriorship is a Neanderthal pursuit. However, it does seem that popular culture *promotes* these insinuations, which are obviously not in the best interest of the expression of individuality. The gun-truck's soundtrack is a looped section from a well-known heavy metal song played in reverse, which may remind the viewer of the sound of an engine. Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 911" showed U.S. soldiers listening to heavy metal in their helmets while they ransacked streets, killing families as if it was a video game. The "pumped-up" aspect of this musical genre reflects well the exhibition's depiction of Geburah.

***Chesed (Mercy):*** As Geburah breaks down, so Chesed builds up. Geburah is symbolized by the warrior king in his chariot. Chesed is symbolized by the benevolent king in the times of peace, reigning over his dominion and governing with wisdom and grace. The *Instruments* version of this sephira is, quite simply, money. A dollar bill hangs from the ceiling, merely a wool blanket painted to look like currency. The character in the center is the throned, ruling king, egocentrically holding a coin containing an image of his own face. He declares forth the law of the land, which in this context is purely economic in nature. The material of the blanket keeps the public warm at night. At the same time it brings to mind Richard Flood's comment that "[m]aking art in the early twenty-first



century is just the same as making art in any other century, except for the money that coats everything like ash”<sup>34</sup> – a blanket of empty ambition. In essence, the sculpture justifies the “unmonumental” style of the works in this installation, and highlights the insidious, capitalistic “giver-of-the-law” that underlies all commodity marketing. The audio element is another reversed song, also popular in its time, which depicts the sounds of clinking coins and cash registers.

***Binah (Understanding)***: It may be noticed that the physical objects being referenced in each of these pieces have gradually become less concrete in terms of actual commercial products, and have started to lean more toward ideological systems. Such is clearly the case with Chesed and its reference to money, which is principally an idea. Binah is the first sephira encountered on the path of evolution that is beyond what is called the Abyss – that which separates the potential from the actual. After Chesed, the works draw forth phenomena that are more like ideological infrastructures than physical objects. Such is the case with Binah, which depicts a strange machine, an accumulated ball of circuitry suspended within itself. The piece is an allusion to technology in general. Technology is, in my opinion, the main medium through which the marketing tactics of gaining capital is proliferated. The sephira Binah is the giver of life in that it embodies the first instance of *form*, as opposed to the *force* of the next sephira, Chokmah. It is also the bringer of death in that it ultimately limits Chokmah’s unhindered energy.

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<sup>34</sup> Flood, “Not About Mel Gibson,” Unmonumental, p.12

***Chokmah (Wisdom)***: Since it is difficult to grasp this and the previously described sphere separately, the discussion will be continued here.

Binah's *form* gives life to all the previous pieces, imbued with the *force* energy of Chokmah, which portrays a lightning bolt descending down a sign post, which issues from a plywood cloud. A magical-looking kite flies dangerously close to the lightning, again calling up a scene from the past – namely, Benjamin Franklin's supposed experiments connected with the discovery of electricity. The kite's string hangs down and travels across the gallery to the Binah sculpture, a key dangling at the end, as in the Franklin story, sending the power to the technological device. Chokmah is the first piece to be quite a bit bigger, at least in height, than a human. This is appropriate, for, as the sign post materially implies, the infrastructures that are in place within society are much larger than any one individual – essentially insurmountable. The audio heard from this piece is a melodic progression of drawn out electrical sparks, which almost intertwines polyrhythmically with the melodic mechanical sounds of Binah.

***Kether (Crown)***: Finally, projected in large scale on the wall between Binah and Chokmah, stripped of all corporeality, is a video showing a huge, metallic, mechanical head discussing the origins of the universe from the perspective of cosmological physics. In fact, the voice is that of Stephen Hawking's electronic assistance, taken from a recording. As Kether represents the source point of all manifestation, it seemed apt to portray the primary Western version of cosmogony, which is predominantly scientific in nature. There is something robotic, however, about this version (hence the machine-head), for science is chiefly an intellectual pursuit. Thus, the sound in this piece is only

vocal and word-based (which hadn't been an element of the audio since Netzach) – it has lost all musical expression. Though the intellect is surely an important aspect of the human entity, when it is given importance above all else, things become cold and deterministic. The magic disappears.

Kether's head is seen in profile, for the other side is invisible, facing the vast undifferentiated aether of the unmanifest. Such is the absolute source in this scheme, as was described earlier by the *prima materia* – the homogenous realm, unseparated into the discrete manifested materials that comprise the key media with which these artworks are constructed.

The encounter with the exhibition as a whole may remind the viewer of a video arcade or perhaps a casino. Each piece emits its own soundtrack, quiet enough to keep a relative amount of distinction between itself and its fellow sculptures, and loud enough to create an overall atmosphere that is somewhat cacophonous. The intention is to mirror the chaotic Western environment while providing enough clarity to potentially glean some kind of understanding of the realities that constitute such an environment. The viewer is presented with a website ([www.sashaleenelson.com/instruments.html](http://www.sashaleenelson.com/instruments.html)) from which one will hopefully download the audio tracks as an album to an iPod. In this way, the tracks become fully audible and distinguished into their separate sephiroth.

The arcade is a fitting analogy also because each station depicts an interactive game of sorts. These are activities that, under everyday circumstances, ultimately thrive on the change in our pockets, and hope that we'll continuously break larger bills. Such games are obviously never to be won, but that doesn't mean we won't carry on trying to

accumulate points that serve to adorn our identities. The games in the *Instruments* arcade, however, do provide an opportunity for victory: *stop playing*.

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As should be apparent at this point, there is an organic element to the process of creation that brought this exhibition to form. Likely due to an interest in depth psychology and occultism, as well as my tendency to work in an immediate, expressive manner, there is plenty of room for things to synchronistically acquire symbolic import on their own. These sculptures are like living creatures, chimaeras that, throughout the creation process, experience a kind of biological evolution dependent on natural selection (the choosing of materials based on the conditions of the studio ‘environment’), adaptability (conforming to conceptual limits), and mutation (changes allowed for in immediate and expressive working habits). Each one is a conglomeration of disparate ingredients that syncretically unite to open doorways. These doorways lead into the hidden dimensions of the hegemonic culture we inhabit, underlain by the qabalistic pattern of the Tree of Life, which opens its own pathways. The multitude of parallel dimensions that interweave and interconnect within the *Instruments* exhibition echo the manifold characteristic of esoteric traditions in general. The correspondence to such veiled institutions makes obvious the obscurity of our Western marketing chaos under which lie the vulnerable tendrils of the human soul – tendrils that seek supports capable of receiving the projections of the psyche. Marketing unfortunately succeeds. Hopefully

this work will contribute in the struggle to rend free the organs of our being and provide some kind of solace for our desperately searching selves.

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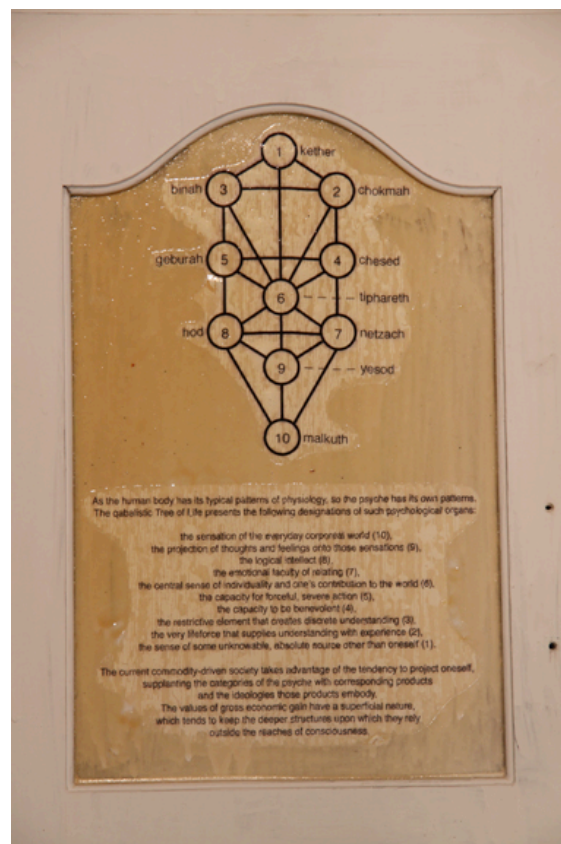
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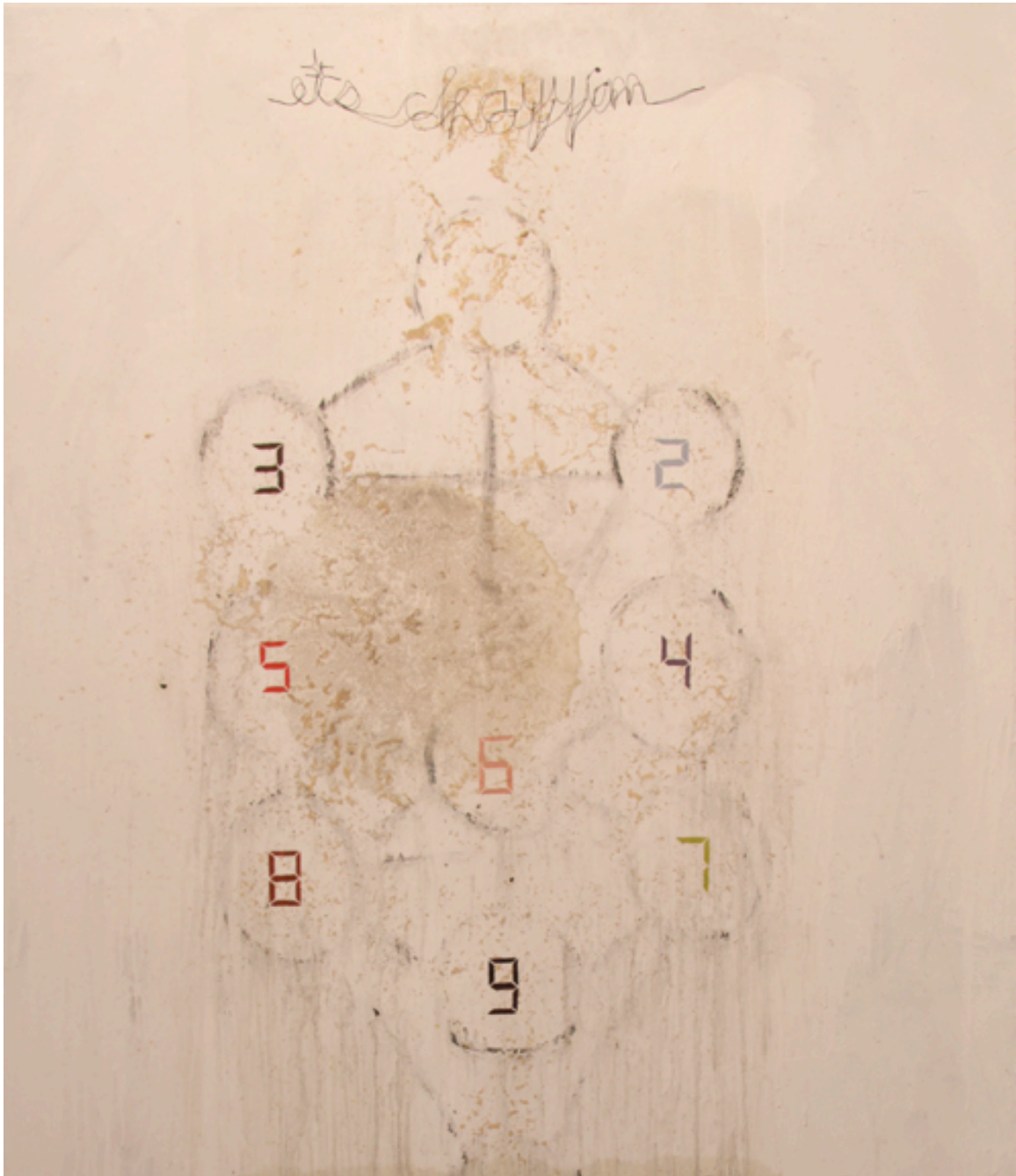
## Illustrations



### i. Installation Views



ii. Seating Area [with detail]



iii. Ets Chayyim





iv. Malkuth (10) [with detail]



v. Yesod (9)



vi. Hod (8)





vii. Netzach (7)



viii. Tiphareth (6)

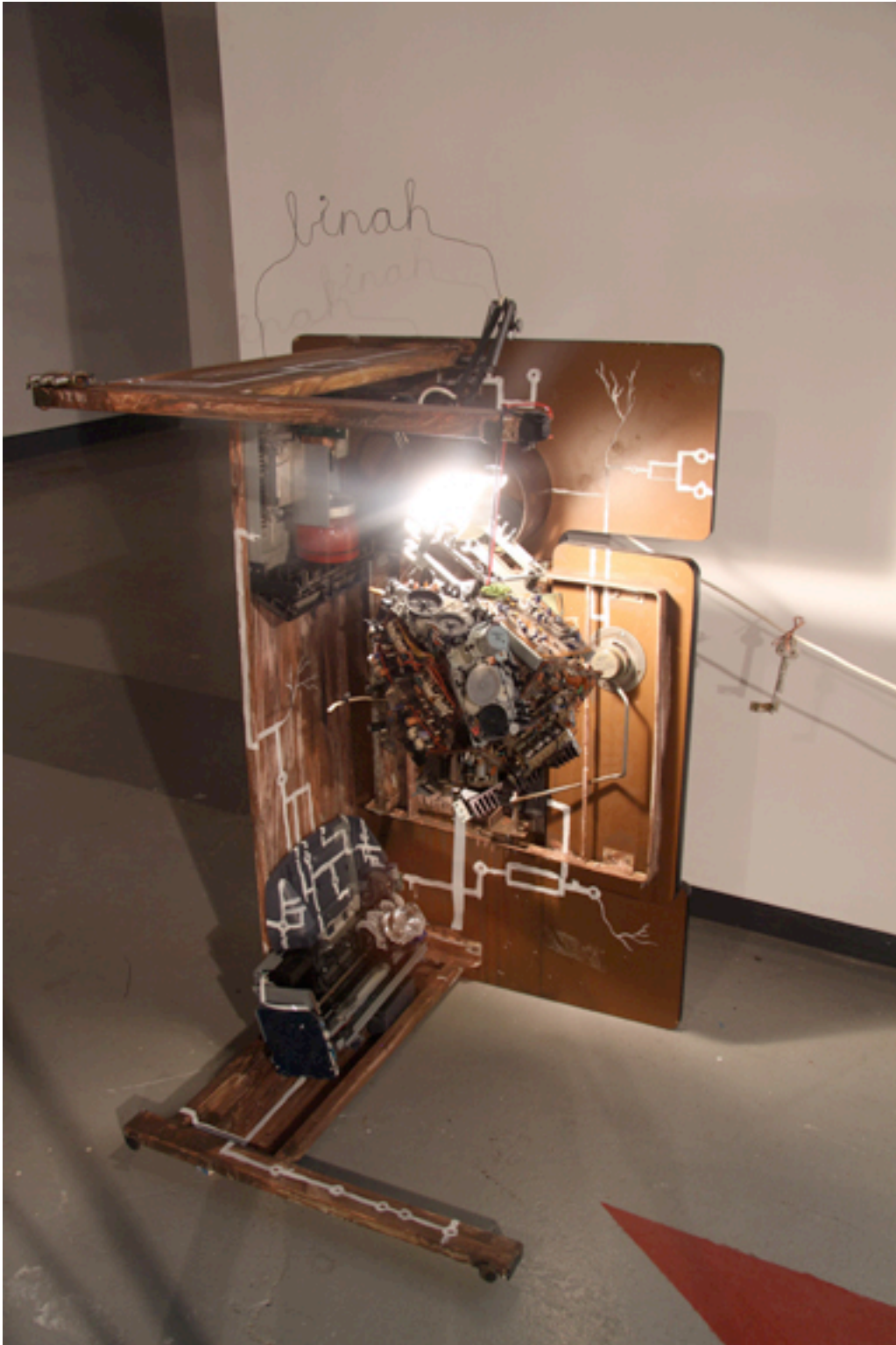


ix. Geburah (5) [with detail]





x. Chesed (4)



xi. Binah (3)



xii. Chokmah (2)





xiii. Kether (1) [still image from video]